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Havasupai

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Frightened Shamans

Manakadja had come to my office on an official call. His linen duster and the derby hat perched atop his braids were special attire. These were the only ones I had seen, so I knew the occasion was important. After the exchange of greetings, tension eased a bit, and the chief reached into an inner recess of the duster and brought forth a thin slice of bone. It was a headscratcher, made from the leg bone of a deer, eight inches long, flat and highly polished. It widened from its point to a broad end through which a hole had been drilled for the insertion of a buckskin thong. A louse, complete in every tiny detail, was tattooed on its point.

Fully appreciating the humor of his act, he illustrated how one stirred up the little fellows when they nipped too hard. He asked, "You savvy?" Then added, "You like 'em, two bits."

Necessity had devised this clever instrument, for even though we waged constant warfare against lice, and the Indians cleaned one another's heads, vermin were still a scourge. If one were too busy in his garden or at games to have a head-cleaning, the headscratcher came into use. I occasionally picked up a louse or two myself during a conference or in a wickiup while working over the sick.

I bought the chief's headscratcher. It would convince my friends back home that I had lived among a primitive people. It still is one of my choice possessions.